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Few are laughing at this farce

WASHINGTON — Spies just aren't what they used to be.

The first FBI agent in history charged as a turncoat turns out to be a perpetually broke, overweight, would-be avocado farmer four months behind on the mortgage, previously suspended for selling household products from the trunk of his car, and the butt of office jokes.

The Soviet agent who enticed him turns out to be an ambitious braggart who doesn't speak very good Russian and who shows up for arraignment in sandals, khaki slacks, and a red-and-black warmup jacket.

Whatever happened to trenchcoats? To microdots and fog-shrouded trysts? To allure and intrigue?

Despite the slapstick overtones surrounding the arrest of FBI agent Richard W. Miller, the national intelligence community isn't laughing.

Miller, despite leaving

enough Bigfoot-sized tracks that his colleagues nailed him quickly, managed to hand over a 25-page document entitled "Reporting Guidance: Foreign Intelligence Information."

Court affidavits say this material gives "a detailed picture of FBI and U.S. intelligence activities, techniques and requirements." Beyond that, the FBI won't talk about damage.

"In intelligence and counterintelligence," said an FBI spokesman, "you just can't tell the opposition how much damage they did or didn't do. You don't want to confirm any victories, and if you tell them they failed, you'll just get them to try even harder."

While intelligence experts speculate privately that Miller handled very little sensitive material, his behavior will probably cause some changes in FBI counterintelligence procedures at the local level. The

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first detail to be scrutinized should be the way in which counterintelligence agents are assigned and evaluated.

Watergate burglar G. Gordon Liddy has taken to the airwaves to criticize his old bureau for "internal discipline which is virtually non-existent." Liddy pines for the days when J. Edgar Hoover canned a colleague for driving his daughter to dance school in a government vehicle.

A return to such an iron hand may not be necessary. The high-tech spying and computer sales scandals of recent months are more damaging to national security than the Miller case. But Liddy's fulminations — and the complaints of others about a lax FBI — should not be dismissed.